

# How Can You Get the Most Out of Bible Study?

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**By Ronald L. Dart**

WHITEHOUSE, Texas—Bible study is fascinating. You may doubt that if your past approach has been to start with Genesis and read straight through. Chances are you made it to Leviticus and gave up.

Let's face it. The Bible is not always easy reading. It requires attention and effort, and it may even require a little help. When Philip encountered an Ethiopian who was reading the Scriptures, he asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

The Ethiopian looked up from the book of Isaiah and answered, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31, NKJV).

The Bible is not one book, but many. And they are ancient books, written in strange tongues with the truth expressed in many complex ways. The Bible has a surface simplicity that reaches out to the mind of a child with remarkable clarity and purity. Yet it also has a depth and subtlety that have baffled philosophers down through the ages.

The books of the Bible seem unrelated in many ways, and yet a pattern is deliberately interwoven, sometimes hidden, sometimes obvious. Solomon wrote:

"It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter" (Proverbs 25:2, NKJV).

God has not laid out the truth in stark clarity for all men to see. The truth will come, but it may come slowly. It may come with considerable effort. Sometimes we need a guide, yet the individual must search out the answers for himself.

## **Your New Bible and Study Aids**

People often ask us for our recommendation on Bibles and Bible study aids. While this is largely a matter of personal preference and needs, we can make some general observations.

Obviously, your most important acquisition for Bible study is the Bible itself. If you already own a Bible, your initial decision is made for you. Chances are that your Bible is a King James Version, but many people find that hard reading.

They want to know which translation is best, easiest to read, most accurate or most literal. Unfortunately, no *one* translation fits all these descriptions.

If you are going out to buy a Bible, be it your first, second, or third, what do you look for? Below are some observations on a few major Bible translations you can purchase.

### **King James Version Bible (1611, Abbreviation: KJV)**

The King James Bible is also known as the Authorized or Common version of the Bible. Many biblical quotations you will read are from the KJV.

Many mature Christians have used the King James Bible for so long and are so familiar with it that they just hate to change. The main argument for keeping it is that some of the best concordances are based on the King James Version.

Unfortunately, the language has changed so much since 1611 that the old Bible simply does not mean what it used to mean.

One reason we keep using the old KJV is that we love its style. According to the King James Bible, Jesus told His disciples, "Let not your hearts be troubled."

The Good News Bible tells the disciples, "Do not be worried and upset" (John 14:1). The KJV has a beauty of style that is rarely matched.

### **New King James Version Bible Translation (1982, Abbreviation: NKJV)**

As its title suggests, the NKJV stays very close to the King James Bible by simply replacing archaic words and phrases with more-contemporary expressions.

The purpose of the NKJV is to "maintain that lyrical quality which is so highly regarded in the Authorized Version." Scholars generally agree that they accomplished that, but wonder if the translation went far enough in making necessary revisions.

### **New International Version Bible (1979, Abbreviation: NIV)**

The New International Version is "rapidly developing into the closest thing to a standard Bible among evangelical Bible-reading people in America."

Many scholars feel that the NIV is a balanced translation. It stays close to the Hebrew and Greek text without becoming stilted as the NASB.

Still, the NIV is another dynamic-equivalence translation, and much depends on what the translator thought the author *meant*. This creates some theological problems, especially in the translator's interpretation of Paul.

### **New Revised Standard Version (1989, Abbreviation: NRSV)**

The Revised Standard Version retains much of the beauty of the King James Version while getting rid of many archaic expressions.

Unfortunately, the Revised Standard Version has now had more than 40 years to become archaic itself.

The RSV was especially noted for its scholarship, but we have discovered so much about the Bible since 1952 that even the RSV is out of date. So the Revised Standard Version Bible committee has released a New Revised Standard Version (1989, NRSV). Naturally, this reflects the progress of scholarship in the intervening years.

### **New American Standard Bible (1963, Abbreviation: NASB)**

The most literal, word-for-word translation on the market today is the New American Standard Bible.

Some authorities consider the NASB choppy and hard to read. But for those who have no background in the biblical languages it serves as an interesting counterbalance to some of the more-modern free translations or paraphrases (as the Living Bible).

However, even this literal translation slips up in places. In Mark 7:19, for example, the words "Thus He declared" are gratuitously added. They are in no ancient Greek manuscript.

### **Holy Bible in Its Original Order—A Faithful Version (2009, HBFV)**

The second edition of the HBFV is the only known modern Bible that uses the original inspired canonical manuscript order to arrange the Bible's books.

This translation restores the Bible's original book order and reestablishes its seven divisions, which are: (1) The Law, (2) The Prophets, (3) The Writings, (4) The Gospels and Acts, (5) The General Epistles, (6) The Epistles of Paul and (7) The Book of Revelation.

According to its translator, the HBFV reflects the true meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek text and shows the unity of Scripture between the Old and New Testaments.

### **New Jerusalem Bible (1966, Abbreviation: NJB)**

The Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible have replaced all earlier Bible translations among Catholic readers. Many scholars consider them good translations except for some Catholic idiosyncrasies and some rather opinionated notes.

### **New English Bible (1970, Abbreviation: NEB)**

The New English Bible, the first British Bible to break completely with the King James tradition, is remarkable in that it is a work intended to be both accurate and literary. It is one of the few modern translations that has attempted to maintain the literary standards of the King James and Revised Standard versions.

Some scholars charge that the NEB translators did too much rearranging of the text. Nevertheless, it makes good reading.

## Which Bible Us Right for You?

As you can see, you have a variety of choices when you go out to purchase a new Bible.

If you want easy readability, the Living Bible is hard to beat. If you want a more-literal translation, perhaps the New American Standard Bible is for you.

Whatever you choose, keep in mind that the truth of God can even survive bad translation. But you still should not carelessly accept one version of a controversial scripture.

One other point if you are buying a new Bible. The version you will use the most, carry to church, read in bed, make notes in, etc., should be of good enough quality to last a lifetime. Look for one with wide margins so you can make notes in it. After a few years, a personally marked and annotated Bible will be one of your most cherished possessions. Your other translations can be more economically bound.

## Bible Study Aids and Reference Books

Frequently, we receive letters asking where a given scripture, sentence or phrase is to be found in the Bible. "I know it is in there somewhere," they complain. "I just cannot find it." Well, they could if they had a concordance.

A complete or exhaustive concordance simply takes every place in the Bible a given word is mentioned and lists it in the phrase in which it is found. If you have heard, for example, that the phrase "Every tub will sit on its own bottom" is in the Bible, all you have to do is look in your concordance under "tub" and learn that it is not there after all.

When you go to buy a concordance, you will find quickly why so many continue to use the King James Version. Most concordances are compiled from the King James Version Bible.

The two most popular concordances are *Cruden's Complete Concordance to the Old and New Testaments* and *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. *Cruden's* is smaller, cheaper, and handier to use. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* is a huge volume, but it also includes a cross-reference to the Greek and Hebrew words used in the Bible.

If you would rather have a subject index instead of the key word index of the concordance, Nave's Topical Bible should fill the bill nicely.

At least as important as a concordance is a Bible handbook. The beginning student can easily get lost. A Bible handbook gives you valuable background information plus the story flow of each book of the Bible. One of the most economical and easy to use is *Halley's Bible Handbook*, although others may serve just as well.

People also ask about commentaries, but I must caution that they are expensive and of marginal value for most students of the Bible. For years I got by nicely with *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Whole Bible*. You might find

more useful *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* published by Zondervan Press. It is much more up to date, easy to use and contains much valuable information—but it is expensive.

I cannot speak for everyone, but I do not consult my commentaries as often as I do my *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. After the fundamentals of two or three versions of the Bible, a concordance and a Bible handbook, I have no Bible study aid more helpful than my Bible encyclopedia.

Shop carefully. You might find an old set at a bargain. There is a new version on the market now that has replaced the old one and knocked its prices down. Nevertheless, the old one is still of considerable value.

Far down the list of useful books would be an atlas of the Bible and a dictionary of the Bible. I have both but consult them less often.

### **Marking Your Bible**

Systematic marking of the Bible can be effective in three major ways:

1. It focuses attention on the scriptures at the time of marking.
2. It brings your eye back to the scripture easily and quickly in future study.
3. It makes key scriptures easier to find later.

Some are reluctant to mark books (especially the Bible), but underlined scriptures, good marginal notes and chain-referenced scriptures may be useful for years to come.

We recommend a Bible with good paper, a little room in the margins, a couple of colored pencils for underlining and a fine-point pen for marginal notes. Beyond these suggested items, all you need is time and a quiet place to get acquainted with the Word of God.

### **Before You Begin to Study God's Word**

It is important to remember one thing before you begin to study the Bible. If you enter on a careful, reverent and persevering study of the Bible, your life will never be the same. You will come to a knowledge of truth you will be unable to ignore.

If you will take a few minutes before and after your study to pray about the things you are learning, you will make a start in building a deeper relationship with your God and Savior.

Be aware right from the start that the enemy in this battle is not another human being, but the spiritual powers of darkness—i.e., Satan the devil.

Perhaps the most powerful weapon at our disposal in this battle is the Word of God.

Four items included in the armor of God have to do directly with the study of the Bible.

- The first mentioned is truth. Jesus said in His prayer for His disciples, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." (John 17:17, NKJV).
- Next He mentions the "preparation of the gospel of peace," which involves the careful study of the gospel so that any Christian can explain it to the seeker after God.
- He then mentions the shield of faith, and Paul tells us: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17, NKJV).
- Finally the Scripture tells us what to pick up as our chief weapon.

"And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17, NKJV).

The man who is determined to do as the Bereans, searching the Scriptures daily, comparing what he is told with what God says, will be a hard man to deceive:

"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12, NKJV).